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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRETORIA 001597

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/02/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SF](#)

SUBJECT: DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE PUTS BEST FOOT FORWARD

Classified By: Charges d'Affaires Donald Teitelbaum. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The Democratic Alliance (DA) will elect a new leader during its annual conference 5-6 May, with the hope that a fresh face and a new strategy will allow the party to break through racial barriers and become more relevant, not only as an ANC watchdog but as a viable political alternative for all South Africans. Thus far, the country's political stratification has been largely based on race, leaving the DA unable to attract more than 12 percent of the electorate. Cape Town Mayor Helen Zille, who has managed to keep the city's fragile coalition alive for over a year, is widely expected to win and accept, provided she be allowed to keep her position as Mayor. In the short-term, Zille is by far the DA's best candidate and will portray the opposition as a potential cooperative partner in government. The DA's long-term goal of widening its support base depends both on Zille's performance and altering party policies and practices that have, until now, left the DA a mainly-white bastion. Under Zille's leadership, the DA will not transform overnight. However, there is a growing audience for her pragmatic, can-do management style which has won her grudging (and quiet) respect from even her harshest political rivals.
END SUMMARY.

ZILLE THE SHOE-IN...

¶2. (C) The Democratic Alliance (DA) is set to elect founder Tony Leon's successor during its upcoming annual conference 5-6 May. Embassy sources note that Cape Town Mayor Helen Zille has all but been assured the position. University of Witwatersrand Professor Eddie Webster, who has known Zille for years, told PolOff on 2 May that the party pressured Zille to run, "leaving her no choice." Zille is running against Eastern Cape provincial DA leader Athol Trollip and the DA's federal chairman Joe Seremane. Trollip is charismatic and speaks Xhosa fluently, but never managed to gain national appeal. Seremane, the only black candidate in a party with few black members, complained publicly last week that he was asked to remove himself from the running by the party's "lily-white leadership."

WHO CAN'T LET GO

¶3. (C) Webster describes Zille as a "female Tony Leon in the sense that she is principled, uncorruptable, in your face, and shares the same politics." However, Zille is also probably more politically astute, as evidenced by her ability to maintain the city's fragile governing coalition for over a

year now. (Note: Zille's political capital grew when she successfully fought off an effort by the ANC to remove her coalition and take over the political leadership of Cape Town. END NOTE) Zille has insisted that she will take the job only if she can retain her position as Mayor. The fact that the DA accepted the compromise illustrates not only a lack of confidence in Zille's contenders, but a dearth of suitable candidates to replace Zille as Mayor. It also means the DA will be the only national party with a part-time leader. Though Zille would grant more power to the DA parliamentary caucus leader and establish a DA satellite office within the city council, juggling local and national responsibilities will be a challenge. Zille needs to keep her coalition intact, improve the city's enormous service delivery problems, and prepare for the 2010 Soccer World Cup, all while addressing issues of national concern, fundraising, strategizing, and keeping in contact with the DA's regional structures. If she neglects the city's issues, she also may jeopardize the DA's long-term goal of attracting new support by showing the electorate they are not doing a better job than the ANC in other municipalities.

DA WILL CONTINUE ITS LIMITED IMPACT...

14. (C) The DA originated as a party that attracted liberal-to-conservative whites who did not feel welcome within the ANC's big tent. Its liberal democratic core later included more conservative former National Party members as apartheid era policies lost their appeal. According to former DA MP Raenette Taljaard, a fierce battle is going on behind the scenes between the "liberals" (who want limited state intervention and are more akin to libertarians in the US) and conservatives of the former nationalist party.

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Though Taljaard believes the party should split along those lines if it wants to survive, frankly neither camp's political philosophies resonate with most black South Africans. Arguments from either camp about limiting social assistance grants, relaxing labor laws, or the supposed unfairness of affirmative action are likely to find little to no traction among the forty percent of South Africans who are under- or unemployed. Indeed, the ANC's social safety net policies that aim to compensate for past discrimination reinforces its appeal to many. Another contributing factor to the DA's weakness in attracting voters is their tacit approval of the ANC's neoliberal economic policies -- one of the ANC's major weaknesses among the disgruntled members of its own coalition on the left. In this sense, it is not only racial stratifications that are limiting DA support, but socioeconomic stratifications as well.

15. (C) The election of a new leader, especially one who is white and who shares Leon's political views, is unlikely to result in major shifts of the party's policies, nor will it overcome the historical factors that have constrained the DA's growth overnight. In this sense, Zille's ability to carve out enough political space to influence the national policy debate and to lure away voters from the ANC and other opposition parties (as the ANC has done to the DA during Parliament's floor-crossing periods), will be limited. What Zille can do, however, is continue and expand her party's role as a government watchdog. She also provides the party with a kinder face, one that is willing to work together, rather than "Fight Back," to echo Leon's disastrous political campaign slogan. However, her victory against the ANC's power grab in Cape Town demonstrates she can and will fight back when necessary.

IN CONTROLLED POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

16. (C) Part of the blame for the DA's inability to make

inroads must also rest at the feet of the ANC. First, the ANC has not taken the opposition seriously, knowing that most blacks would not vote for what is seen as a white party. Despite signs in recent years that service delivery failures and corruption have prompted some to question their reflexive loyalty to the ANC, most disgruntled ANC members are still inclined to abstain from voting for any other party. The town of Khutsong is a perfect example; people burnt down houses of local ANC leaders to express dissatisfaction rather than change their vote to the opposition. Second, the opposition has had some difficulty communicating its views; the government-owned television station blacklisted many analysts and commentators who were critical of the ANC and Parliament allows less time for the opposition to speak and often fails to answer the opposition's formal requests for information. According to the DA, the government refuses to answer 50 percent of their information requests, contrary to the Promotion of Access to Information Act. Third, critical internal debate within the ANC has declined, leaving even less room for external debate. As a result, whites are not the only ones who have been frustrated and silenced from the debate. When political analysts like Sipho Seepe, Aubrey Matshiqi, and William Gumede criticized the ANC, they were asked for their "struggle credentials," as if only those who were engaged in the struggle against apartheid have the right to contribute to the current political debate.

COMMENT

17. (C) Given the DA's almost all white constituency, coupled with white emigration patterns, it is unlikely that Zille will be able to boost the DA's membership enough to challenge the ANC for power at the national level anytime in the near future. Racial identity is the primary fault line in national politics and the ANC's "collectivist psyche" is likely to remain through the 2014 and 2019 elections. What Zille could bring to the table, however, is a cooperative attitude to governing, something Leon failed to achieve. Many ANC leaders tell us privately that they admire Zille for having kept the governing coalition in Cape Town together. The time is right too, not necessarily for any mass defections from the ANC to the DA, but for building a more receptive audience, which is growing disillusioned with the ANC's lackluster performance in critical areas such as education, health, and employment, but who feel they have no alternative.
TEITELBAUM